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Cover picture: Healing votive depicting female viscera, Roman Gaul, approximately 1st century BCE.
See the article by Leon A. Bastiansen on page 102.

Clearing the Waters and Stressing the Evidence? Wigodner on Gendered Healing Votives in Roman Gaul

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After Caesar's conquest of Gaul there was a shake-up of the religious landscape with the Romans instituting a crackdown on Gaul's traditional religious leaders, the druids. A new phenomenon emerging were healing sanctuaries, in which votives depicting bodies or body parts were offered, possibly as an alternative to bloodier indigenous practices. Working from the hypothesis that gender ideology was an intrinsic part of the Roman imperial project, Wigodner (2019) examines 1,050 such votives to reach the conclusion that women tended to adopt Roman-style representations to a greater extent than men and/or that the post-conquest period might have seen an increased religious participation by women. In this critical review it is argued that Wigodner's paper is not without its own gender-ideological assumptions, which remain unchallenged by the author, contributing to weakening the strength of her conclusions. Healing votives nonetheless constitute a source group worth exploring further in order to better understand the often gender-differentiated acculturation processes which took place in the provinces of the Roman empire post-conquest.

Key Words: Acculturation, Colonialism, Druids, Ethnicity, Fashion, Gaul, Gender, Healing votives, Sanctuaries, Language, Religion, Roman empire

Gender ideology was inextricably intertwined with the Roman imperial project. On the broadest scale, imperial ideology reflected a gendered world-view: entire provinces were feminized in Roman thought, brought under control by the stronger, highly militarized, more masculine Roman empire.

Wigodner, 2019: 619

With this characterization of an empire, which on the Romans' gendered mind map not least was personified by the female goddess Roma, oftentimes depicted surrounded by the spoils of war brought back by the male members of the Roman armed forces, Wigodner opens her ambitious piece, which promises to lead us a step forward on the journey towards a quantification of the socio-economical world of antiquity, to put straight how the body was represented in a colonial context and to offer a more direct glimpse of what was going on in the minds of the Gallic *provinciales* as they were struggling to redefine their identity post-conquest. The present review will offer a critical evaluation of the theoretical underpinnings and key findings of the study and then end up by asking whether fruitful avenues for further research have been charted.

Having startled her readers right from the beginning, Wigodner sets out to delineate her topic and *modus operandi*. Because gender ideology was so central to how the Romans ruled their provinces, she posits that it is vital for gendered decision making to be made visible in a post-conquest context, which she chooses to refer to as colonial rather than imperial. An artefact group ideally suited to this end, Wigodner argues, are the representational healing votives, which began to be dedicated at Gallic sanctuaries soon after Caesar's conquest, possibly as an alternative to the Gallic practice of severing and displaying heads, which the Romans considered to be too violent. Some templegoers likely made their offering themselves, whereas others would have bought theirs on-site, hence they had some choice but to some extent were limited by the availability of materials or pre-made votives; the choice of votive would have resulted from a balance between individual preference and "more structural pressures" (Wigodner, 2019: 621).

In spite of these constraints, Wigodner nonetheless sees healing votives as sources with the advantage of being more individual and more anonymous than epitaphs, which were carefully composed either by the deceased or by family or other relations in order to transmit a desired image to posterity. This would have been particularly true in a context in which the colonizer and the colonized differed in their perception of appropriate gender roles, with Roman writers describing the "large size, impressive strength, and ferocity of Gallic women" (Wigodner, 2019: 622); following Hope (1997), Wigodner argues that the erection of Roman-style epitaphs perhaps should be seen as an attempt to fit in by projecting a more Roman image. Moreover, argues Wigodner, healing votives might have been affordable to groups that could not afford epitaphs.

The key to making the healing votives talk, argues Wigodner, is to divide them into groups according to material type, artistic style and depicted body or body part, with the gender of the templegoer being deduced from the latter, and then to look for statistically significant differences between subgroups at the 5%

level. Having excluded gender-ambiguous cases as well as suspected divinities, Wigodner ends up with a sample of 1,050 published votives out of an initial 1,468. The main findings obtained are that men tended to prefer votives made of wood or metal as well as more stylized depictions, whereas women tended to prefer stone as well as more naturalistic representations; an impressive 51.89% of stone votives were offered by women. This, argues Wigodner, amounts to women preferring more Roman-style votives and men continuing to cherish the native Celtic style to a greater extent, as pre-Roman Celtic art tended to be more abstract than the Graeco-Roman marble naturalism and as wood and metal saw extensive use in pre-Roman Gaul, whereas the use of stone only commenced in earnest with the coming of the Romans.

As the production of wooden votives ceased in late first century CE and based upon the reasonable assumption that the preference for Roman-style representations would have increased across genders as Roman occupation dragged on, Wigodner argues that one possible explanation for the findings would be that women's participation in healing rituals increased over time, possibly aided by the crackdown on the druids, which accompanied Caesar's invasion. Alternatively, women might have preferred Roman-style votives, as this was one of the avenues through which they were able to showcase their acquisition of Roman ways, with them being excluded, for instance, from service in the legions. If the latter explanation be correct, this would suggest that the offering of supposedly anonymous healing votives might have served a virtue-signaling function not that far removed from the one served by very public epitaphs, a point not explicitly made by Wigodner.

What Wigodner does pick up on is that her findings call into question the assumption, which she finds e.g. in Voss (2005: 471), that women invariably act as guardians of indigenous ethnicity in an intercultural contact situation with men more quickly adopting new cultural ways. Rothe (2014: 504) finds the same assertion in Nadig (1986), and it is perhaps worth speculating as to where it might have originated only to be cast into doubt. In Spengler's (2011: 966) roughshod *Völkerspychologie* predating the four authors we, in line with Wigodner's findings, encounter the opposing claim that women typically adapt more quickly to the social ways of a new environment. Spengler's work we might choose to dismiss as phantasmagoric in case we find his brush to be too wide for our time, but Wigodner's findings are also in line with Lynn and Piffer's (2011) study of gender differences in foreign language-learning ability; perhaps something has been lost along the way and has now been found again.

Wigodner in the end seems to err on the side of increased female participation over time as the most likely hypothesis and ends her paper on an optimistic note, stating: "This may mean that over time the general socioeconomic

conditions of the population improved to the extent that opportunities for poor women increased to the level of opportunities for poor men" (Wigodner, 2019: 638). For some compatibly inclined women of Gaul, then, the shift from native Celtic warrior society to the rule of Roman law might have meant new opportunities, but one must ask whether Gallic women's inclinations can really be reconstructed (and corrected?).

Wigodner's study would seem to be underpinned by a 50% model, which goes unchallenged throughout: 50% participation by each gender in the activity at hand and, presumably, in most other activity is what the post-Iron Age Gauls ought to have been aiming for irrespective of any gender-specific and time-contingent preferences they might have exhibited. In Wigodner's model, one assumes, the genders invariably took an equal liking to participating in the healing ritual but at the same time were so different and monolithic that the type of votive which their members chose to offer is a sure clue as to their relative participation. A male templegoer offering prayers on behalf of his wife or daughter and therefore depositing a female-depicting votive, for instance, would fall outside the model but might nonetheless have deposited the votive, which therefore ended up in the wrong category. Wigodner does, however, refer to the small number of 76 votives depicting children as indicative of templegoers usually offering votives on behalf of themselves rather than others. One might theorize that this was a more certain way of benefiting from the healing powers of the deity being worshipped (as well as from those of the mineral waters of the sanctuary also mentioned by Wigodner).

Nonetheless, Wigodner's historical actors appear to be monolithic and to aim straight for the 50% mark; all the more monolithic they evidently became as the Romans started to impose their more rigorous and binary gender roles upon Gallic society, i.e. during the post-conquest period when female participation is found by Wigodner to likely have been increasing following the decline of the druids. As evidence for the proposed lesser gender differentiation in pre-conquest Gaul, Wigodner refers to pre-conquest Gallic women's graves containing weapons and feasting paraphernalia as well as to Gallic men's graves from the pre-conquest period containing jewelry and "personal ornamentation appropriate only for women in Rome" (Wigodner, 2019: 622). The present author proposes that these pre-conquest grave ensembles can probably best be explained, not as indicative of gender-specific preferences in life, as Wigodner would seem to suggest, but rather of burial together with artefacts belongings to family and relations of the opposite sex. The Roman officer's grave uncovered at Unterloisdorf, in which the man's legs were tied together with a women's belt (Grömer et al., 2019: 47-48), would seem to indicate that this practice did not necessarily cease post-conquest. One is left with the impression that Wigodner's

historical actors with their aim firmly set are missing out on some of the finer nuances of cross-gender interaction, which nonetheless were open to the actual actors of Romano-Gallic history.

The author's breakdown according to depicted body part might aid in diagnosing her actors. Wigodner is happy to conclude that the women offering at the sanctuaries would seem to have been afflicted by a wide array of ailments, which they, for the most part, would have been quite capable of experiencing on their own as well as in the married state. Had they namely to a greater relative extent been seeking the aid of the deity in order to be able to better care for their families, this would indicate that they had suffered a reduction "to their reproductive role" (Wigodner, 2019: 638). Spengler's (2011: 678-681) *Ibsenweib* would seem to have been entering the stage, which could indicate that his morphology of world history is correct and that the inhabitants of the Roman empire, just like ourselves, had entered the stage at which the *Ibsenweib* invariably appears, a conclusion which would obviously be at odds with less cyclical and more end-pointy historical eschatologies (e.g. Fukuyama, 1992).

An alternative explanation might be that present-day preoccupations and values in this case are being projected back in time and held up as a progress-measuring stick in front of a past reality, of which we have only a partial picture but which in all likelihood was fundamentally different from our own present, a process which is often referred to as Whig history writing and which, though by no means outlawed, is usually considered bad historiographic practice. The case of suspected deviation from orthopraxy at hand becomes all the more startling when one considers that Wigodner does note that anthropological models of present-day contact situations might be a poor fit for the situation in Roman Gaul. The present author, at least, is left wondering whether the women of Roman Gaul really differentiated between self-prescribed freedom or bondage according to which ailments afflicted them to a sufficient degree as to make them seek out their local healing sanctuary. To aid in the fine-tuning of the diagnosis it would be really helpful to know whether Wigodner would consider a Roman officer, perhaps the one from Unterloisdorf, to have suffered a reduction to his role as soldier (or sun-worshiper?) upon dedication of an altar to Mithras, or to his reproductive role, were he to have dedicated a votive at one of the healing sanctuaries on behalf of his sick daughter.

Wigodner's sample size compares favorably e.g. with de Callatay's (2005: 369) count of Mediterranean shipwrecks per century or Morris' (2004) count of anthropological and house remains in ancient Greece. Extending the sample to include votives from other provinces would obviously have increased the sample size but also evened out any differences between provinces, and looking for variability between provinces would likely be a promising avenue for further

research. A more serious criticism would seem to be that too much symbolic significance might have been attached to the artistic style and material of the votives on behalf of the ancient templegoer. As Vout admonishes, the discussion of ancient material culture might tend towards oversignification; after all, nobody wants to end up with a conclusion that is "wishy-washy" (quote Vout, 2003: 195). However, material remains, not least in a provincial context, are oftentimes our only sources, so in the end it is probably a question as to whether we want to submit completely to Foucault and admit that we know nothing or to practice sound criticism and work constructively with what we have got; Wigodner's strategy, luckily, seems to be the latter.

Studies of acculturation processes within the Roman empire have often looked at language and dress as potential signifiers of culture and have reached somewhat varying conclusions with regard to the affinity of the genders for guarding the old or embracing the new. Clarkson (2012: 50-52) found that women in Egypt preferred to use the indigenous Coptic language in letter-writing with the men showing a greater affinity for Greek. In Gaul, Rothe (2013; 2014), studying the iconography on epitaphs, found that men still clad indigenously post-conquest with women adopting a new, simpler clothing style; in Noricum/Pannonia the situation was the opposite with the elaborate indigenous women's costume exhibiting great regional variability. The parallel with Wigodner's findings for Gaul are obvious and the further research suggested above could usefully look at whether the types of healing votives offered by men and women respectively differ between provinces in analogy with, or perhaps opposition to, the other differential acculturation traits exhibited by the genders in each province. Rothe's reference to increased interregional intercourse in Gaul and greater identity stress in Noricum/Pannonia would seem to only inadequately explain why in Gaul it was the men but in Noricum/Pannonia the women who retained their traditional style of clothing; perhaps the study of healing votives can help solve that puzzle.

It might also be useful to look at regional differences within Gaul. The new pan-Gallic women's costume replaced local costumes, which apparently fell into disuse post conquest; perhaps local 'patriotism' was now instead showcased at the newly founded healing sanctuaries. As discussed above, the comparison between the style of clothing depicted on epitaphs and the types of healing votives offered is one between public image and private preference, although the distinction is potentially somewhat blurred. The same kind of comparison one would be able to make if comparing the archaeological record of the private rites performed at healing sanctuaries with the record of public community rituals performed, for instance, at sanctuaries associated with the imperial cult and the state triad. Also, other types of offerings could usefully be included in the analysis, e.g. coins or bronze votive pins, the latter of which the present author finds in

evidence in Archaic Greece (e.g. Kladouri et al., 2021), however not in Roman Gaul. As pointed out by a helpful reviewer, the outlook of the present, as well as of Wigodner's, paper might have been narrowed through lack of thorough consultation of the French-language literature on the subject (Loris, 2012).

Prompted by the reading of Wigodner's paper it certainly has been possible to point in quite a few directions, which future research could profitably take. The adventurous might view her findings as being on a firm footing. This theoretical stance would seem to lead one to submit completely to Henig's statement that Roman ways upon adoption could be "the paths of cultural freedom" (Henig, 1995: 31), more generally to conclude that the defeat of a cast of bearded warrior priests by an external colonial force might bring about an increase in female opportunity, thereby creating the ideal conditions for the *lbenweib* to thrive, thus in turn ensuring that the warrior priests will take over again soon enough due to the dwindling of the *limes* defenders. However, the present review still ends on a critical note, asking whether Wigodner's actors, sadly perhaps, might be vocalizing at a pitch which would have been alien to the inhabitants of Roman Gaul (Krahé, Uhlmann & Herzberg, 2021).

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